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Impact of Dead Creek studied

By M.I. BLACKWELL
Of the News-Democrat

CAHOKIA — State agencies concerned with the dangerously high level of chemicals found in Dead Creek will now focus their attention on the long-term environmental impact of the contamination, its extent and determining who is responsible.

That is phase two of a three-part plan to remedy a problem that may have existed for more than a decade but wasn't discovered until May. Phase one involved taking the samples of dirt and water and fencing in the creek.

Today, work crews with the Division of Land and Pollution Control, a branch of the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, were expected to begin assembling drilling equipment to take samples of soil and ground water surrounding the creek area.

"This division will develop a program to determine the extent of the pollution in the affected area, as well as north and south of the area of immediate concern," according to a statement issued by the IEPA at a news conference Wednesday in Cahokia. "Its primary objective will be to establish the exact perimeter by a sampling program.

The following areas are to be sampled under phase two:

- East and west of the ditch from Queeny Avenue to Judith Lane.
- North and south of that area from Queeny beyond the industrial complex and from Judith to the Mississippi River.
- Vegetation along both sides of the creek and nearby crops.
- Core sampling to determine the extent, if any, of groundwater contamination.

IEPA officials would not speculate how long it may take to determine the extent of the contamination. Nor would they say how much a cleanup would cost.

"It's no overnight solution," said John Renkes, supervisor of the IEPA Emergency Response Unit. "We have no figures, nor are we shooting from the hip to guess the cleanup."

James Kelty, an IEPA chemist with the Emergency Response Unit, said the cleanup would be "fantastically expensive."

A ½ mile, 30-foot-wide section of Dead Creek, that runs from Queeny Avenue in Sauget to Judith Lane in Cahokia has been quarantined by the IEPA. Illinois Department of Transportation crews last week erected 7,000 feet of 4-foot snow fence around the area and posted "Keep Out" signs. Certain sections of the creek have

been known to suddenly start smoldering and glowing.

The creek, which is about seven miles long and runs east of Illinois 3, is a former drainage ditch that empties into the Mississippi River.

Test results of soil from the creek in Sauget show 1,600 to 17,000 parts per million of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls). The level of PCBs decreases in the southern half of the creek. PCB levels above 50 ppm are considered hazardous.

Test results did reveal high levels of toxic metals in the southern part, with decreasing levels farther north. An "extremely high" concentration of phosphorous — 12,000 ppm — was found near Judith Lane in Cahokia. Other metals found were zinc, lead, nickel, copper, and barium.

However, IEPA officials said the chemicals found in the creek pose no immediate health problem to residents. "You have to get down there and rub your nose in it and rub some on your skin before it will have any effect," Kelty said.

And test results on area water wells found low levels of pesticides, but those did not originate in Dead Creek, officials said.

Air monitoring will also continue in the

area, officials said. Samples taken earlier were negative.

Dirt sampled taken from the creek 25 yards south of Judith Lane also revealed the presence of PCBs and other metals. That part of the creek, which runs through a residential area, also will be sampled, officials said. "We're going all the way to the river," Kelty said.

Officials are unsure if the chemicals have reached farther south than Judith Lane. A dam — a naturally blocked culvert — may have prevented chemicals from moving any farther, but officials are not ruling that out. "If that area is found to contain high levels of contamination, it will also be quarantined," officials said.

A Sauget landfill, bounded by Queeny Avenue on the north and Falling Springs Road on the east, is suspected of being a chemical dump. It also will be tested with metal detectors before any digging begins.

The Illinois attorney general's office is pursuing suspected dumpers, who may be responsible for the chemicals found in the creek. They refuse to disclose the names of the suspects.

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Photo by Gerardo Casper

Pete Lauman at edge of creek Wednesday

Creek

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"Only so much is traceable to one person," said Reed Neuman, an assistant attorney general. "We're hesitant to start naming names."

Cahokia city officials and residents attending the news conference who live in the vicinity of the creek expressed mixed reactions to the test results.

Residents have said the creek has been contaminated with the chemicals for possibly more than 12 years.

"At this point I think they are doing what they can do," said Cahokia Health Officer Tonie Townsend. "I'm glad something is being done. It may not be quick enough to suit a lot of people."

It isn't. "Meanwhile what am I supposed to do, sit there?" said Pete Lauman, the Cahokia resident whose complaints in May prompted officials to investigate the creek. "Am I going to go through this next spring?"

Lauman's property borders the creek. His prize terrier died after it rolled in the ditch.

"I think it's terrible," said Donna Tammer, a Sauget resident who lives on Queeny Avenue, 1 1/2 blocks from the creek. "I think the damage is already done."

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